

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > Philippines > The Left (Philippines) > CPP (Purges) (Philippines) > **Red purge victims' kin find partial closure. Exhumed from unmarked grave in Cebu**

Red purge victims' kin find partial closure. Exhumed from unmarked grave in Cebu

Wednesday 27 September 2006, by [RIMBAN Luz](#) (Date first published: 27 September 2006).

CONSOLACION Aniasco Niduelan somehow knew she would find her sister in Cebu.

Several times in the past 20 years, Aling Cion, as she is called, saved whatever she could from her pay as a street sweeper and bought passage to Cebu. She would get off at the pier.

But with no idea where to look, she simply wandered around the waterfront for hours, scanning faces in the crowd and hoping one of them would be that of her younger sister, Luz Aniasco Laguna.

Luz and her husband, Herculano Laguna, had been labor organizers in Davao in the early 1980s.

They went to Manila for a visit in 1984, telling relatives they were on their way to new jobs in Mandaue, Cebu.

Aling Cion's last contact with the couple was when she saw them off at Manila's North Harbor as they prepared to board the vessel with their then 3-year-old son, Herlo.

Aling Cion, now 61, has since been searching for the Laguna family. Her search finally came to an end earlier this month when she witnessed the exhumation of what were believed to be the remains of Luz and Herculano Laguna.

Their unmarked graves were some 50 meters from each other in the mountains of Barangay Bonbon in Cebu City. Apparently, they were victims of the purge within the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in 1985.

When the couple were taken and killed, no arrangements were made for their son Herlo, who was left in the care of their laundrywoman.

Although he grew up with an impoverished squatter family in Mandaue, Herlo earned athletic scholarships and was about to graduate with a degree in education when he was shot to death in a fraternity war last year. He met his end just like his parents — the object of a senseless and irrational rage.

Luz and Herculano Laguna were among thousands of cadres and members of the underground movement suspected of being "deep penetration agents" (DPAs) of the military. In a series of purges in the 1980s, the suspected DPAs were arrested and detained. Many were tortured, a practice supposedly forbidden in the communist movement. Hundreds, if not thousands, were executed.

The CPP, which is waging a "people's war," Asia's longest communist insurgency, later admitted the purges were grievous mistakes and vowed never again to commit them. But by then, many had died and the children left behind, a number of them, forgotten.

Trade union cadres

Those who knew them say the Laguna couple belonged to a group of 13 trade union cadres who in 1984 had been transferred to Cebu from Mindanao, which was then in the throes of an anti-DPA campaign called Kampanyang Ahos. (Ahos is Cebuano for garlic, which in Philippine folklore is a potent weapon in warding off aswang [witch or viscera sucker]).

Suspicion fell on the 13 who were then executed around the same time. The remains of only five of the 13 have so far been exhumed and recovered.

"I pity them. They were only fighting for change in our society," said a tearful Aling Cion who, with her sister Lita Longanilla, spent a week in a campsite in Bonbon, waiting as forensic experts carefully retrieved every shard of bone from the unmarked graves.

Forensic anthropologist Jerome Bailen presided over the exhumation, making sure his team recovered every bit of detail needed to reconstruct what he called a "forensic narrative" that would reveal how the Laguna couple died.

"We have to individualize what we are doing. These are not mass graves exhumed like kamote (sweet potato) diggings, and laid down on anything helter-skelter. We need all the information to build up a case," said Bailen, a professor at the University of the Philippines.

Healing and justice

The exhumation was organized by the Peace Advocates for Truth, Healing and Justice (PATH), itself composed mainly of former members of the communist movement who were arrested and tortured during the purges.

PATH chair Gil Navarro said his group's work was different from the exhumations being done by the military, which has its own agenda.

PATH's main objective is to "look for and identify the remains of those executed in the purges and return them to relatives still searching up to now," Navarro said. Through informants, PATH locates the sites where purge victims are believed to be buried—a complicated, risky and tedious task.

Come clean

PATH wants the CPP to once and for all come clean on what happened, reveal exactly how many people were arrested and killed, and help in exhuming and retrieving the remains. But such a demand would not be easy to meet.

As far as the Left is concerned, the purges are a thing of the past, errors for which the CPP has already apologized and atoned for.

"What I know is that for the most part, the purges were declared to be errors because torture was used. Torture is prohibited in the movement. So what happened is that there were victims who were actually innocent," said Representative Satur Ocampo, former spokesperson of the National Democratic Front and now Bayan Muna party-list representative.

Paranoia

Ocampo added that the CPP Politburo resolved in the late 1980s to reach out to the victims and their families, apologize and offer compensation. Ocampo, however, could not say for certain exactly how many victims were covered by this act of contrition.

It is difficult to account for everyone who died when the CPP cleansed its ranks of suspected spies. For one, many were known only by assumed names or aliases.

In other cases, said human rights advocate Ramon Casiple, the executioners themselves became victims as paranoia spread and suspicion implicated even those who were doing the purging.

More than anything else, the use of torture was the major error during the purge. Ocampo, himself heavily tortured by the military in the 1970s, knows that information obtained through torture is unreliable. Yet the CPP used it to extract information from suspected spies.

“The logic of self-implication and the pressure to implicate others were the reasons so many were arrested and investigated during the purge. It was done to ease the pain of torture and many innocent comrades were implicated,” Ocampo said.

Polka dot blouse

More than 20 years later, the signs of torture were still evident on the remains of Luz Aniasco Laguna. Aling Cion fainted at the sight: Hands tied behind Luz’s back, ankle and wrist bones bound with blue nylon rope, a strip of denim cloth positioned somewhere near her mouth and neck and, worse, an 18-kilo boulder over her cracked skull.

Aling Cion said she recognized her sister Luz: She knew so well the polka dot blouse that covered Luz’s remains. That blouse, now faded, had a gash apparently made by a bladed weapon over her left breast. Aling Cion’s physical description of Luz also matched what the forensic experts were able to reconstruct.

But it was a different story altogether for what were believed to be the remains of Herculano, known to friends as Lando or Lani. Bailen and company had no physical description of him or any photos available, making the process of reconstruction and verification more difficult.

Hope

For now, Aling Cion has no choice but to wait as Bailen’s team finishes its analysis before scheduling a proper wake and burial for her sister and brother-in-law.

Despite the pain, however, Aling Cion took home with her one piece of good news from Cebu. Although Luz, Herculano and Herlo are gone, their line continues with 10-month-old Aaron Heaven, the boy Herlo sired before he was shot in March 2005. Aling Cion can only hope that Aaron Heaven will be spared the tragic fate that befell his father and grandparents.

P.S.

* Published on Page A1 of the September 27, 2006 issue of the “Philippine Daily Inquirer”.
Circulated on T’bak mailing list.